

2022

## "CELTIC THINGS" IN TOLKIEN'S MYTHOLOGY

Erin Kriz

John Carroll University, [ekriz18@jcu.edu](mailto:ekriz18@jcu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://collected.jcu.edu/masterstheses>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kriz, Erin, "'CELTIC THINGS" IN TOLKIEN'S MYTHOLOGY" (2022). *Masters Theses*. 56.  
<https://collected.jcu.edu/masterstheses/56>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Essays at Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact [mchercourt@jcu.edu](mailto:mchercourt@jcu.edu).

“CELTIC THINGS” IN TOLKIEN’S MYTHOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate School of  
John Carroll University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

By  
Erin R. Kriz  
2022

Many scholars grapple with Tolkien's goals in creating a mythology for England—something he claimed to have aspired to in his writing—in an attempt to connect, or even reconcile, these claims with the presence of other cultural traditions in the mythology of Middle-Earth. However, many of them overlook the Celtic presence in Tolkien's work in favor of the Norse. This is partly due to Tolkien's appraisal of Celtic tradition in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, in which he makes some rather biting and critical comments on the culture's literary and mythological traditions. At the same time, it is often these claims that ignite the discussion of Celtic tradition in Tolkien scholarship, especially when they seem to contradict what is actually included in the Middle-Earth mythology. So, in facilitating this discussion, it is crucial to take a look at scholarly interpretations of Tolkien's personal writings in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*.

Many scholars will also take into account Tolkien's academic expertise and scholarly interests, particularly in the realm of Welsh studies. First, we will look at how scholars are defining "mythology", how Tolkien defined it, and how this factors into the comparability of Tolkien's work with different myths and legends. In his article *A Mythology? For England?*, Anders Stenström will introduce this discussion by proposing a distinction between "mythology" and "legend", ultimately redefining the nature of Tolkien's work. In *A Myth for Angle-Land*, Sarah Beach will echo and reinforce this issue within the scholarship by discussing the problem of sourcing for the usage of "mythology" in tandem with Tolkien, particularly by introducing the content of *The Letters*. I will place these broader issues in conversation with three scholars who tackle the presence of Celtic tradition in Tolkien's works, with particular emphasis on *The Silmarillion*, but also in *The Lord of the Rings*. Scholars Dimitra Fimi and Annie Kinniburgh play off of each other very well and both will address *The Letters* and how its contents contradict the myths of the Noldor in *The Silmarillion*. Kinniburgh, in particular, will assess the

comparability of the Noldor with the Tuatha Dé Danann of the Irish *Lebor Gabàla Érenn* in *The Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danann: J.R.R. Tolkien's Irish Influences*. In “Mad” Elves and “Elusive Beauty”: *Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien's Mythology*, Fimi will bolster her argument by placing Tolkien's attitudes in context with his mythological goals, his academic career, and the cultural tensions of Britain during his time. Here, she will make a distinction between the broader Celtic conversation and the discussion of Irish traditions in particular, as Tolkien seems to have favored Welsh over Irish studies—perhaps due to cultural tensions.

Lastly, in *Investigating the Role and Origin of Goldberry in Tolkien's Mythology*, Taryne Jade Taylor will offer a different perspective with a close reading of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in analyzing the characterization of Goldberry and her potential Celtic roots. Although *The Silmarillion* is often easily comparable to other myths because of its mythical, epic quality, Taylor suggests that the seemingly out-of-place realm of Goldberry is actually a purposeful inclusion of the Celtic realm in an English myth—hence why it seems so out of place. This will play well off of Fimi and Kinniburgh's analyses of Tolkien's claims about Irish tradition in *The Letters*, as it reflects his attitudes toward “Celtic things” as being nonsensical and difficult to understand—a sentiment often expressed by scholars about Goldberry and Tom Bombadil. Each scholar demonstrates awareness that Celtic tradition is not the primary or even a significant influence in and of itself, but that it is significant in reference to Tolkien's dismissal of it in *The Letters* and given the cultural context of the time. Fimi and Kinniburgh in particular do well to address the nature of Tolkien's mythological goals, which can be placed in conversation with Stenström's definition of “mythology” in Tolkien scholarship. Based on this examination, we can conclude that the existing scholarship on Tolkien's mythology suggests that there is a

significant (and often neglected) Celtic presence in works such as *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, despite his seeming disdain for Celtic tradition and expressed denial of its inclusion.

In participating in this strand of Tolkien scholarship, scholars engage in a larger dialogue which concerns the meanings of mythology—what makes a mythology “valid”? Is it necessary for it to be culturally “isolated”, or “pure”? And perhaps most importantly, how did Tolkien define myth and what does this entail for his undertaking in creating a mythology for England? One scholar who does well to parse out what the term “mythology” can mean is Anders Stenström. Stenström offers a refreshing take on Tolkien in *A Mythology? For England?*, which calls into question scholars’ tendency to refer to the term “mythology” in an overly broad sense. In other words, not really discussing what mythology can mean or meant to Tolkien sort of dilutes and weakens any subsequent discussion about the nature of Middle-Earth myth. In this way, Stenström stands out in his analysis as he turns a more critical eye toward the already existing mountains of scholarship on Tolkien. This adds some nuance to a body of scholarship which tends to jump right into connecting cultural traditions with those of Middle-Earth without stopping to question the mythological parameters set forth by Tolkien. For this reason, I think it is important to introduce Stenström here so that these ideas may inform our assessment of scholars who deal directly with Tolkien’s mythological influences. Even though Stenström does not necessarily argue that Celtic tradition had a strong influence on Tolkien, he really highlights a spot where the existing scholarship is lacking, and shows why scholars who do not consider this in their argument might be weaker—and why those who do are much more nuanced in their study.

While scholars are not entirely united on all things Tolkien, there does seem to be at least one strong agreement across the board: that Tolkien aimed to create a mythology for England in

writing *The Lord of the Rings* (and perhaps, by extension, *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*, and other Middle-Earth tales). In his article, *A Mythology? For England?*, Stenström brings this back into question by examining Tolkien's own claims about the matter. He points out that his original expressed goal was to create "a body of more or less connected legend" (Stenström, 310). I must be careful here to bring Stenström's analysis down to scale, however. He is not, in effect, tackling the entirety or even a significant portion of Tolkien scholarship. While I think the implications of his ideas are grander than the scale of the article, in reality he really only criticizes one author's claims—those contained in Humphrey Carpenter's *J.R.R. Tolkien: a biography*. Although Carpenter's biography was written in 1977, and by that token might be a bit dated, Stenström seems to suggest that these claims about the nature of Tolkien's mythology have passed under the radar without sufficient inspection. In effect, the oft-loosely quoted descriptor of *The Lord of the Rings* as "a mythology for England" is seldom sourced directly back to Tolkien himself and the context in which he was discussing the undertaking (Stenström, 310).

In *A Myth for Angle-Land: J.R.R. Tolkien and Creative Mythology*, Sarah Beach echoes a similar sentiment: "'A myth for England.' This phrase has rattled about in my mind for some years, a phrase remembered as being Tolkien's description for what his creative motive had been. Yet, when I went hunting for the reference, I did not find it where I thought it was: somehow I had thought it appeared in the introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*, but the references actually appear in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*" (Beach, 31). While Beach's article places the issue of sourcing in a secondary position, it serves as confirmation of the lack of context and potential misuse of this phrasing in the overall scholarship. Stenström merely takes this a step further and posits that our understanding of Tolkien's creative motives builds the

foundation by which existing scholarship stands. As such, I think his perspective is an important lens through which we can evaluate the existing scholarship on the potential Celtic influences in Middle-Earth mythology.

Stenström's primary method of approaching this issue is to parse out the actual phrase "a mythology for England", and to attempt to source it accurately, effectively placing it in its original context. He ultimately sources this popular phrasing back to Carpenter's biography of Tolkien, and suggests that this is really just a hodge podge of some things that Tolkien said—and thus is not entirely accurate,

"A mythology for England", a phrase which is always put within quotation marks and never provided with a source. As far as I have found, the true tale runs so: on page 59 of *J.R.R. Tolkien: a biography*, Carpenter (1977) wrote of the young Tolkien's appreciation of the *Kaleva*, quoting his wish for 'something of the same sort that belonged to the English', and commented 'perhaps he was already thinking of creating that mythology for England himself'. Evidently satisfied with his phrase, Carpenter titled Part Three of his book '1917-1925: The Making of a Mythology' and opened it with Tolkien's "desire to create a mythology *for England*". (Stenström, 130)

Here, Stenström takes issue not only with the broad usage of the term "mythology", but also with the phrasing "for England". Although this may seem like mincing words, he suggests that it is these small details that lead to overgeneralizations and misinterpretations of Tolkien's work. He proposes instead that Tolkien's writing is a "reconstruction" *presented to*, and not *created for*, the English. Tolkien took, then, what bits and pieces of English myth could be salvaged and reconstructed it in order to make it whole: "restoring something that belonged to the English, presenting them with their own mythology, rather than creating something for

England” (Stenström, 130). He then supplemented it with themes and linguistic styles of other cultural traditions that were of similar “clime and soil” (Beach, 31). Examples of such traditions could be Norse, Finnish, and as we will see some scholars argue, Celtic.

While Stenström is concerned with the way scholars are referring to Tolkien’s mythology, and, by extension, the way they make comparisons with historically entrenched mythologies, Beach is concerned more particularly with his creative motives—his expressed sense of identity and love for England, as well as his own personal statements in *The Letters*. Both find much of their source material in *The Letters* rather than referring to Tolkien’s creative work—this is effective in the sense that we are dealing with direct claims that he made throughout his life. Beach’s article is not so much argumentative as it is a summary of Tolkien’s thoughts about the English identity and his potential creative motives. For the purposes of this discussion, I think her coverage of *The Letters* will lend some nuance to the idea of creating a myth for England, and what that means to Tolkien and his sense of the English identity. This will give us a good backdrop to usher in the discussion of the Celtic realm as it relates to England, particularly in relation to Tolkien’s own attitudes and literary tastes.

On this matter, Beach does well to summarize Tolkien’s wistful and loving musings about England, and his longing for a sense of mythology to bolster the English identity. She also draws attention to Tolkien’s self-professed mission statement: “Having set myself a task, the arrogance of which I fully recognized and trembled at: being precisely to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own” (Beach, 35). Tolkien echoes here what Stenström proposes is his goal: a restoration of a fragmented and scarce mythological tradition. Tolkien elaborates on his creative vision in another letter:

It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our ‘air’ (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe; not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be ‘high’, purged of the gross, and fit for the adult mind of a land long now steeped in poetry. (Beach, 31)

Here, Beach relates Tolkien’s pride in his West-midland blood and conjectures that perhaps this explains his dissatisfaction with the existing body of Arthurian legend as being more *British* than *English*, in the sense that it largely contains Norman French and Celtic elements. In this way, it makes sense that Tolkien might want to foster a sense of “isolated” English legend which carries a particular *Englishness* that is not captured in other legends. Whether any mythology can really be said to be “isolated” or “pure”, or even needs to be, is another matter entirely—and even Tolkien himself admits that he found inspiration “abroad”, so to speak:

I was from the early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country; it had no stories of its own (bound up in its own tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands...Of course there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing. (Beach, 31)

Here, Tolkien does not seem to be opposed to borrowing inspiration from other cultures, but even so, his adverse reaction to “Celtic things” is somewhat telling. Beach notes that when confronted with “accusations” that his tales were “of a mad, bright-eyed beauty that perplexes all Angle-Saxons in the face of Celtic art”, Tolkien was rather fierce and adamant in his rebuke. He

writes, “Needless to say they are not Celtic!...I do know Celtic things (many in their original languages Irish and Welsh), and feel for them a certain distaste; largely for their fundamental unreason” (Beach, 32). Here, Beach brings forth an issue that Tolkien scholars will have to grapple with in arguing that Celtic tradition had an influence on his work, as he directly claims that Celtic tradition is not to his taste and his ideas are not of that origin. Beach and Stenström demonstrate, in my opinion, the importance for scholars to address the nature of Tolkien’s mythology as being different from the “standard” definition. In addition, addressing *The Letters* will be of utmost importance in order to reconcile Tolkien’s claims with any traces of Celtic things in his work.

One such scholar who takes on this task is Dimitra Fimi, in “*Mad*” *Elves and “Elusive Beauty”*: *Some Celtic Strands in Tolkien’s Mythology*. Fimi does well to introduce this topic by addressing the complexity of Tolkien’s attitudes towards “things Celtic”. On the one hand, Tolkien openly expresses disdain for the tradition and rebukes any claims that they are of any influence on him. Yet, his academic career betrays not only familiarity with Celtic tales but also keen interest—particularly in Welsh, which he eventually mastered. Irish, on the other hand, he found wholly unattractive and gave up trying to learn it. Still, despite being an Anglo-Saxon philologist, he demonstrated an enthusiastic investment in Welsh language and tradition.

Fimi not only draws on Tolkien’s academic interests as a potential influence in his writing, but also cites specific works that have parallels in Tolkien’s myth. For one thing, Tolkien actually admits that tales of the Grey Elves (primarily in *The Silmarillion*) were of a Celtic nature, though it is not entirely clear how purposeful this is (Fimi, 157). In fact, he used the phonetic quality and structure of Welsh as inspiration for perhaps one of his most ambitious undertakings in myth-making: creating the language of the Grey Elves, also known as Sindarin

(Fimi, 158). His admiration for the language was so great that he mastered Medieval Welsh and was able to teach it at the University of Oxford, effectively absorbing it into his expertise as a medievalist. He not only dabbled in Celtic study, but directly engaged in it, volunteering to play an active role in examining a Celtic archaeological site from a philological, mythological, and literary perspective (Fimi, 158).

While demonstrating interest and even expertise in some Celtic matters may betray some of Tolkien's early influences, it is not entirely satisfactory to argue that Celtic things are necessarily included in his work because of it. Fimi bolsters her argument, then, by citing specific examples of "Celtic things" to be found in both *The Silmarillion* and in *The Lord of the Rings*. Fimi's discussion also serves as a satisfactory response to the issues Beach brings forth. Tolkien wants to present the English with their very own mythology, and seems to be fine with taking inspiration from greater Britain- why, then, the particular aversion to Irish traditions? This could be explained by the tense history between the English as subjugators and the Irish as subjects- in other words, the English always had a sense of "assumed" identity in their cultural dominance:

Since the dominant and leading role of the English in the creation and maintenance of the Empire was never challenged or contested until the Irish successfully did so in the early twentieth century, there was no need for a specifically English national identity to emerge...It was mainly during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth that Anglo-Saxonism became a myth, and it is not at all accidental that this happened during a period when the British Empire was slowly starting to move towards the stage of decline. (Fimi, 159-160)

Given this context, a rising sense of Irish nationalism would have been threatening to a culture whose primary source of identity had been power. Additionally, the Celts already had a strong cultural tradition that had developed organically throughout history, so it was not difficult for them to draw on a sense of identity and pride once they were empowered to do so. Given the tension implied by this cultural-historical context, we can imagine why perhaps Tolkien felt the need to deny any presence of Celtic influence in his legendarium- in order for the English to be able to distinguish themselves from the rising Celtic presence. Although it is easy to speculate, there is no concrete evidence to confirm that this was Tolkien's fear in admitting that Celtic traditions may have had an influence on his work. Still, Fimi's discussion of cultural and historical factors is very valuable and often overlooked in other scholarly debates on this topic. Even if we cannot make concrete conclusions about Tolkien's attitudes about the situation, it is still useful to be informed about the cultural tension that may have informed his mythological undertaking.

Even so, Fimi effectively manages to solidify this argument by drawing parallels between English-Irish tensions and the contents of *The Book of Lost Tales* and *The Silmarillion*; ultimately tracing them back to the Anglo-Saxon past,

In *The Book of Lost Tales*, one of the main characters, a traveler to the Island of the Elves, who later reports the true tradition of the Elves to Men, is a fictional Anglo-Saxon. In the earlier version his name is Eriol, he comes from the lands whence the Anglo-Saxons came to England. Later, his sons Hengest, Horsa, and Heorrenda conquer the island, and befriend the Elves, and the island becomes England. In the second version he is called Ælfwine, he is an Anglo-Saxon of eleventh-century Wessex, sailing from England to the island of the Elves. He finds out that the Elves used to inhabit England but

left it because of their longing for the West, and they still speak the old English language. Central to the whole conception is the contrast between the English and Celtic, and Eriol/Elfwine is a key character in this antagonistic attitude, since Tolkien claims that it is from him that “the *Engle* (English) have the true tradition of the fairies, of whom the *Íras* (Irish) and the *Wéalas* (Welsh) tell garbled things. Thus, he distinguishes the Elves and fairies from the equivalent creatures in Celtic mythology, and claims the true tradition as being exclusively English. (Fimi, 160-161)

Here, Fimi is directly citing claims made in *The Book of Lost Tales: Part II*, which was edited by Christopher Tolkien in 1984. It seems, then, that when Tolkien does admit to a Celtic presence in his work, it is very instrumental and purposefully included to further distinguish the English presence. In addition, it makes some fairly bold claims and almost serves as a “founding mythology” which gives credit to the English for fairy stories and folklore. As Fimi astutely observes, this sort of claim signals yet another cultural phenomenon that may have influenced Tolkien. As we know, the English had been experiencing something of an identity crisis; and one concrete product of this broader cultural tension was some literary dispute. Laying claim to an entire literary tradition—that of folklore and fairy tales—is perhaps too bold a claim to make with such confidence. However, it was far from uncommon and was a hot topic in the realm of Anglo-Irish literature (Fimi, 161-162). Trivial as it may sound, the national tension did indeed stir up a great deal of anxiety even about the validity of one nation’s folklore, “at that period, at its most extreme, the dialogue about Irish home rule could become an argument about who had the better fairies: England or Ireland” (Fimi, 162). Key literary figures such as W.B. Yeats were enthusiastic and impassioned in this debate, defending or rebuking the validity of one strain of folklore over another. It seems that Tolkien was not immune to such defensive and anxious

sentiments either. Fimi claims that he betrays this envy of Celtic folklore in his essay, *On Fairy-Stories*, in which he admits that English fairies were very much influenced by their Celtic counterparts and predecessors.

Fimi is also able to effectively connect this cultural tension with Tolkien's creative work in *The Silmarillion*. She draws in particular from the "Flight of the Noldor", in which the Noldor seem to be inspired by the Tuatha Dé Danann of medieval Irish folklore. The Noldor were an Elvish people who essentially rebelled and abandoned Valinor, the paradise of their gods, or god-like beings, which were called the Valar. Having known such close proximity with the Valar, the Noldor were blessed with semi-divine, demi-god-like qualities. The story of the Tuatha Dé Danann of the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* ("Book of Invasions of Ireland") shares very similar qualities to that of the Noldor. Like many myths, the "Book of Invasions of Ireland" recounts the mythical history of Ireland and its ancestors and is laced with supernatural qualities and fantastical embellishments. This essentially renders it a pseudo-historical piece.

The Tuatha Dé Danann were essentially considered the last wave in a series of invasions before the Sons of Míl (said to be the ancestors of the Irish) came and settled. Similarly to the Noldor, the Tuatha Dé Danann possess supernatural or divine qualities, and are described as "large, strong, and beautiful beings who mingled with mortals and yet remained superior to them" (Fimi, 162). They are not quite gods, nor are they ordinary men, having learned the arts of druidry, prophecy, and magic from the far corners of the world (some versions recount them as coming from Greece, others from northern islands). They were also descendants of a people that had once inhabited Ireland, so they had somewhat of a hereditary claim to the land. Supposedly fleeing from the Philistines, they challenged the currently settled race, the Fir Bolg, to a "battle of kingship" which would ultimately end in their victory and lordship over Ireland (Fimi, 162).

Similarly, the Noldor had once inhabited Middle-Earth before the dawn of the world and the lighting of the lamps (the Sun and Moon), and a leader among them, Fëanor, remarks that they should “return home”. Upon their invasion, they burn the ships of the Teleri, their kin, and engage in a battle with the evil forces that had festered there in the absence of the Valar. In essence, they undergo the same struggle for lordship over the land after forcefully invading. Remarkably, the Tuatha Dé Danann are also said in some versions to have burned their ships upon arrival. Others, still, maintain that they descended upon Ireland in a terrible dark cloud. The burning of the ships is one of the more obvious parallels, but their reasons differ in each tale. Fëanor, in his greed, burns them so that no other Elves may come to pass the icy Helcaraxë, and that they alone might have dominion over Middle-Earth. The Tuatha Dé Danann, however, burn them so that they have no choice but to fight and cannot retreat in shame and loss. Both, however, communicate a sense of pride and even arrogance in their actions.

Additionally, Maedhros, a son of Fëanor loses a hand to escape torture during this conflict, and the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann, Nuadhu, also loses a hand in battle. Aside from all these similarities, the one aspect of these tales that really sets them apart from others and seems to solidify their connection is the casting away and exile of both the Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danann to the sea (although of this it is said that some of the Tuatha Dé Danann remained on land and diminished into lesser peoples- cave-dwellers and the like.) In *The Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel echoes this phenomenon of diminishing in her acknowledgement to Frodo that the dominion of Men will bring about the fading of the Elves, and that the completion of the quest of the Ring would deplete their power in Middle-Earth: “Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and be forgotten” (Fimi, 164).

According to Fimi, this connection between the two tales has been bounced around in the scholarship since the 1970's, and was key in encouraging scholars to look more closely at the Anglo-Irish connections in Tolkien's work. This Celtic angle in Tolkien scholarship, then, is not brand new, but it remains decidedly less popular and less conclusive than the examination of Tolkien's Norse influences. Furthermore, drawing parallels between Tolkien's creative work and cultural mythologies is a common angle through which scholars address the Middle-Earth mythology. However, Fimi once again distinguishes herself in connecting these parallels with relevant cultural-historical tensions. Rather than simply connecting Middle-Earth with historical mythologies, she places it within its historical-cultural context and draws parallels between English-Irish relations and the tales of Middle-Earth. In this way, the historical-cultural context serves as more than just a backdrop but is directly tied into the discussion of Tolkien's creative decisions.

In *The Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danann: J.R.R. Tolkien's Irish Influences*, Annie Kinniburgh supports Fimi's claim that the comparability of the two tales is evidence that Tolkien was influenced by Irish folklore in writing "The Flight of the Noldor". Kinniburgh brings up something that is a source for speculation across this area of scholarship, and is often the starting point for discussion: Tolkien was so open about his inspirations in Finnish and Welsh, which largely informed his construction of the Elven languages Quenya and Sindarin, not to mention the Viking nature of the horse-lords of Rohan. Why does he allow such transparency in these matters, and then is either completely silent or adamantly opposed to the idea that there are some Celtic elements in his mythology? As Michael Livingston points out in *Troy and the Rings: Tolkien and the Medieval Myth of England*, Tolkien is even willing to admit that Gondor and Minas Tirith have some inspiration in Greco-Roman tradition. Classical myth could be said to be

much further removed from England than Ireland, yet Tolkien does not demonstrate the same opposition to admitting that it shares some themes with his own work as he does with Celtic myth (Livingston, 73). One could even say that such admittance would threaten the validity of the Middle-Earth mythology as functioning as an English legend; yet perhaps, as scholars like Fimi suggest, the nearness and strength of Celtic tradition may have felt more “alive” and threatening given the cultural ebbs and flows of the time. It is precisely Tolkien’s seeming dismissal and even disdain for “Celtic things” that often seems to ignite these discussions.

Overall, Kinniburgh’s discussion of these parallels is heavier on the literary and lighter on historical-cultural context. While Fimi’s article is perhaps the most balanced and well-rounded; Kinniburgh benefits greatly from narrowing the focus of the topic and engaging in somewhat of a close reading of *The Silmarillion*. She also does well to note the nature of Irish myth, in the sense that it can be considered “inadequate” in a number of ways that perhaps Tolkien did not want to emulate. For example, the prevalence of oral tradition meant that a great deal of the raw folklore would have been lost, and what remained was likely preserved by Christian monks with obvious Christian sensibilities (Kinniburgh, 32). Tolkien was quite vocal in his philosophy on myth—that it should not be mingled with religion. This was often a point of discussion between he and his friend and contemporary, C. S. Lewis. This again reinforces what could perhaps be considered a weakness in the scholarship, and something that Stenström very astutely brings to light: what is mythology? Should religion and creation myths be considered separately or are they necessarily entwined? Most importantly, how did Tolkien define it and how might it have informed his creations? Kinniburgh’s observation about the “inadequacies” or breakage in the passing down of Celtic folklore is a theme that should perhaps be observed in

greater detail in relation to Tolkien's mythological goals, as she does not really elaborate on the matter and merely alludes to it in introducing the *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (Kinniburgh, 31).

Kinniburgh also cites Tolkien's academic interests and engagement with Celtic studies, as he did in fact express interest in incorporating elements of the Tuatha Dé Danann in *The Lost Tales* (Kinniburgh, 32). This aspect of Tolkien's academic career is a pretty important inclusion which I am surprised Fimi did not allude to—as it serves as confirmation that Tolkien was indeed interested in incorporating a piece of Celtic mythology in his work. Although this did not pan out in the way that Tolkien had planned, it is still possible that his interest in this tale seeped into *The Silmarillion* anyway. Kinniburgh makes many of the same observations as Fimi with respect to the literary and thematic parallels between the two legends—but generally has more to offer in terms of examples. One parallel that she notes as being significant is the nature of death in each tale. Rather than passing on to another realm, the dead simply undergo a change of place within the same realm that they lived in. In Middle-Earth, the dead are taken into the keeping of the halls of Mandhos, where they might rest and eventually return: “death is not a cessation or elevation of being, but merely a separation from the living” (Kinniburgh, 34). The Irish counterpart of this concept is the Tech Duinn, a great hall which houses the dead. The Tuatha Dé Danann, then, would have undergone a similar journey in death as the Noldor.

Somewhat unlike other scholars, who often concede that Celtic myth is a weaker influence than Norse myth, Kinniburgh argues just the opposite with regard to the Elves, “it is easily discernible that the mythical ancestors of the Irish people, the Tuatha Dé Danann, have far more in common with Tolkien's Noldor than do the Norse *álfar*, the Anglo-Saxon elves, or the Scottish residents of the Seelie and Unseelie courts” (Kinniburgh, 41). In fact, she quite effectively addresses the issue that Stenström brings up, and Fimi attempts to address, with

regard to Tolkien's mythological goals. She proposes that Tolkien denies Celtic influence because he merely wanted to capture the *feel* of Celtic folklore, perhaps the literary quality and atmosphere in this case, rather than directly borrowing from it: "he wanted his mythology to be 'full of dark and twilight, and laden with sorrow and regret,' a mix of 'Celtic enchantment and Norse vitality'" (Kinniburgh, 41-42).

Perhaps this echoes Tolkien's sentiment that Celtic stories are of "fair elusive beauty" but are at the same time of "fundamental unreason". Tolkien elaborates on this distinction somewhat, saying: "They are of bright color, but are like a broken stained glass window reassembled without design" (Fimi, 156). In this way, Kinniburgh may be onto something in suggesting that Tolkien appreciated the quality, the *feel*, as it were, of Celtic tales, but felt that they did not have a sense of structure or logic that he found tasteful. Indeed, Tolkien remarks that for a myth to be believable it must convey an "inner consistency of reality"; and perhaps this is the substance which he found to be lacking in Celtic myth (Bardowell, 91). Still, I am not sure this explanation is entirely satisfactory, as Kinniburgh cites some very specific instances in which the Noldor parallel the Tuatha Dé Danann. With such concrete overlap, it follows that Tolkien would have been inspired by the content and not just the quality of the tale.

Fimi sort of echoes this sentiment in an attempt to reconcile Tolkien's dismissal of Celtic things with what we actually encounter in the tales. She approaches this somewhat differently, however. Instead of arguing that Tolkien was inspired by the quality of Celtic folklore (rather than the content), she proposes that Tolkien was simply influenced by his academic and literary interests, despite denying the *purposeful* inclusion of Celtic things. While this is an easy enough conclusion to come to, and certainly not unique to her argument, she adds a bit more nuance to

the suggestion in proposing that he eventually accepted Celtic things as valuable and was not as defensive about it as he was in his early life:

This incorporation of Celtic elements into a mythology that was originally intended to be purely “English” shows that Tolkien’s views gradually changed. He eventually came to regard the Celts not as binary opposites to the Anglo-Saxons but as co-invaders and co-inhabitants of the same island, of the same land about which he felt so passionately. This can clearly be seen in his essay “English and Welsh” where he not only rejects all the romantic notions of the stereotypical depictions of Celts and Anglo-Saxons, but also declares his admiration for the Welsh language as an essential part of Britain’s past and soul. (Fimi, 167)

Here, Fimi cites a statement that Tolkien made later in life, while his originally quite defensive comments regarding Celtic tradition came from the early stages of his writing and in response to early critiques of his work. Perhaps it is as Fimi suggests, then, that Tolkien eventually came to terms with his ever-present admiration for Celtic tradition in a sort of appreciation for their shared history and co-habitation of the same land. On this matter, Fimi leaves us with a quote from Tolkien about the Welsh language: “For many of us it [i.e. Welsh] rings a bell, or rather it stirs deep harp-strings in our linguistic nature. In other words: for satisfaction and therefore delight...we are still ‘British’ at heart. It is the native language to which in unexplored desire we would still go home “ (Fimi, 167).

Here, we see an acknowledgement of a shared sense of “home” that resides in Anglo-Saxon and Celtic hearts alike, regardless of what Tolkien ultimately seems to consider arbitrary borders and divisive stereotypes. As lovely as this sentiment is, I think his specific focus on Welsh in this case is quite telling. Most scholars are already in agreement that Tolkien was quite

fond of Welsh and was open about using it in his mythology. Perhaps, then, the broader discussion needs to be narrowed down to contend with more specifically Irish rather than Celtic things, as Tolkien seems to be quite particular of which Celtic things he approves. Granted, as a philologist, it makes sense that he would have refined linguistic tastes and could appreciate Welsh and not Gaelic, for example, whereas those of us less seasoned in linguistics might not be able to discern huge differences between them. Perhaps, then, scholars are personalizing an issue that Tolkien may have viewed strictly in a philological or academic sense, rather than a cultural-historical sense. However, the fact still stands that Fimi and Kinniburgh successfully point out specifically *Irish* roots in the story of the Noldor, and this is certainly significant given that Tolkien does not seem to have many positive things to say about Irish things in particular.

As thorough and well-supported as these arguments are, I found it strange that scholars like Stenström, Fimi, and Kinniburgh all mentioned the influence of the *Kalevala* on Tolkien, but only briefly. I do understand the importance of narrowing one's focus in order to facilitate productive and concise discussion; but I believe the importance of the *Kalevala* cannot be understated, especially in scholarship regarding Celtic influences on Tolkien. Of the three scholars I have mentioned, Stenström is the only one among them who delves into this a little bit, stating that it was an influence on the young Tolkien, who longed for "something of the same sort that belonged to the English" (Stenström, 310). More importantly, however, he factors this into the discussion of the term mythology, and how we should regard it in the context of Tolkien's work. Essentially, he demonstrates that the *Kalevala* is not quite a mythology in the classic sense, but "a body of more or less connected legend" (Stenström, 310). Therefore, the meaning of mythology, from Tolkien's perspective, might be more adequately comparable to something like the reconstructed Finnish legend, rather than the ancient and organic mythologies

that scholars often look to. This suggestion carries many implications regarding the comparability of Tolkien's mythology with Celtic folklore (i.e. are they even comparable when the definition of Tolkien's myth differs from that of the ancient Celts?) My main criticism here, then, is that Stenström makes these heavy implications—which are, might I add, the whole point of his argument—yet he spends minimal time expanding on why the *Kalevala* is so comparable and relevant to Tolkien's mythological goals.

It is for this reason that I think Matthew Bardowell makes a critical contribution to the scholarship in *J.R.R. Tolkien's Creative Ethic and Its Finnish Analogues*. Bardowell's discussion of the *Kalevala* essentially serves as a remedy for this oversight in much of the scholarship, as the previous scholars merely mention it as a brief introduction or an afterthought. Bardowell places the *Kalevala* as central to this discussion and emphasizes its significance in Tolkien scholarship, noting that Tolkien himself admitted to its influence on him as being “the original germ of *The Silmarillion*” (Bardowell, 92). Tolkien also openly admired the creative mind behind this legend and what it accomplished for the Finnish people. Elias Lönnrot was similarly engaged in academic life as a linguist and folklorist of the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century, and sought to provide Finland with a sense of national identity. This had become a dire need in the face of the overpowering Russian presence which threatened the diminishing and stamping out of their native language and culture. In fact, the *Kalevala* is unanimously cited as being crucial to the reinforcement of Finnish national identity, and was ultimately instrumental in empowering them to pursue independence in 1917 (Wilson, 131).

As the *Kalevala* is not a Celtic source, I will not delve as much into the content and themes it shares with *The Silmarillion*. However, I think it is a necessary inclusion since Stenström lays the foundation of our discussion in defining Tolkien's mythology. The fact that it

was written in order to defend a weakened and threatened national identity is perhaps much more comparable to Tolkien's legendarium than ancient mythology, since Tolkien and Lönnrot shared a similar purpose and academic background. In addition, neither of them are strictly mythologies in the classic sense of being ancient and organically developed. Rather, they are reconstructed legends presented to their respective peoples, and both of them were popularly received as such. Although this may pose a threat to comparisons with Celtic myth such as those of Fimi and Kinniburgh, I think both of them do well to acknowledge its existence and influence on Tolkien rather than to deny it. Both of them, then, seem to have a balanced view on the extent of Celtic influence on Tolkien—that perhaps there are stronger comparisons to make, but that the significance of Celtic things should not be neglected either. In this way, Stenström and Bardowell respectively introduce and explain the implications of the *Kalevala* functioning as somewhat of a template for Middle-Earth mythology. From this perspective, Tolkien's mythology is indeed “a body of more or less connected legend” and not a proper mythology, as Stenström argues; it is reconstructed and revitalized legend but not organically formed through the aging of cultures and passage of time. In context, it also shares the origin of the *Kalevala* in addressing a sense of lost identity and broader cultural wounds.

Even so, this definition of Tolkien's mythology does not necessarily preclude the analysis of its connections with organic Celtic mythology—as Fimi demonstrates, Tolkien clearly took inspiration from other mythologies and admitted to doing so. This is especially pertinent given what we know about Tolkien's academic career and literary and linguistic tastes. In this aspect, Fimi does well to emphasize Tolkien's academic interests. She also does acknowledge the comparability of the *Kalevala* early on, so this adds some credibility to her argument. In fact, almost every scholar who contends with Tolkien's Celtic influences shows recognition that it is

not a primary source of inspiration and will often be considered secondary to other traditions which receive a lot more attention. Scholars, then, are not arguing that the presence of Celtic influence is in itself significant, but that it is significant given Tolkien's claims in *The Letters*, as well as his academic interests and the cultural context of his time.

So far, much of the scholarship we have examined has dealt primarily with *The Letters*, *The Silmarillion*, and short stories and essays written by Tolkien. In terms of Tolkien's creative work, it is easy to pin *The Silmarillion* as perhaps the most "mythic" in quality. It contains common mythic themes such as creation, destruction, and rebellion, as well as a sense of the "ancient" and the passage of time with the rise and fall of civilizations, empires, and kings. It truly encompasses the grand scale implied by the term "mythology". Although *The Silmarillion* seems to be favored in the scholarship in terms of examining mythical origins, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy should not be overlooked in its legendary quality. Many scholars grapple with the trilogy by referring to the significance of rings, the nine worlds, and horse-lords in Norse and Viking tradition. However, if one looks closely, we can still find the Celtic realm in the nooks and crannies of Middle-earth—even during the time of the Ring Bearer after many of the great deeds of the world have already been accomplished and the old powers are fading with the rise of Men.

One such Celtic realm is that of Tom Bombadil and Goldberry. These two characters are somewhat of an enigma in Middle-Earth, and as such, are subject to a great deal of scholarly scrutiny. This is largely due to the fact that they are difficult to define by the common racial parameters set forth by Tolkien; they do not seem to fit into the categories of Elves, Men, Dwarves, or Hobbits. They almost seem to exist somewhere in between, or are different creatures entirely. With all of the scholarly attention that these two receive in Tolkien

scholarship as a whole, Taryne Jade Taylor is somewhat unique in viewing them through the lens of Celtic folklore. In *Investigating the Role and Origin of Goldberry in Tolkien's Mythology*, she attempts to explain the (somewhat confusing) inclusion of Tom Bombadil and Goldberry in the first part of Frodo's quest, being *The Fellowship of the Ring*. She then makes conclusions about Tolkien's mythological purpose in his depiction of what could perhaps be considered Celtic in nature. Once again, Taylor will lend her voice to the greater scholarly discussion about Tolkien's attitude toward "Celtic things".

Like many other scholars, Taylor uses Tolkien's claims in *The Letters* as a catalyst for discussion. Of Tom Bombadil he writes, "As a story, I think it is good that there should be a lot of things unexplained (especially if an explanation already exists)...even in a mythical Age there must be some enigmas, as there always are. Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally)" (Taylor, 147). Tom Bombadil's realm is dream-like and seems to exist outside the bounds of ordinary lands. It is as if Frodo and company are transported to a "Faerie" realm, which may be our first clue to a Celtic influence. Though Tom Bombadil is certainly an enigma, as Tolkien says, Goldberry is perhaps even more mysterious in the duplicity of her gentle, carefree nature and her obvious power. What purpose does such a woman, neither human nor Elf, have in Middle-Earth? Why is she so powerful, yet seems uninvolved in- and almost separated from- the grander scheme of things? Galadriel, for example, is another very powerful character. Though she cannot directly act against Sauron- her power being too great and vulnerable to treachery- she is still very much concerned with the Ring-Bearer's quest and helps the Fellowship along in the ways that she is able. Galadriel is very much entrenched in the fate of Middle-Earth and it is well known that the destruction of the Ring will have consequences for her even in Lothlórien- a realm which also seems ethereal and perhaps "removed" in some way from the surrounding lands. Goldberry, on

the other hand, for all of the power she possesses, seems relatively untouched by the Shadow emanating from Mordor, despite being well aware of its movements.

In this article, Taylor suggests that Goldberry stands apart from the “Englishness” of the rest of *The Lord of the Rings* because she ultimately resides in a Celtic realm. This effectively renders her appearance as intentionally out of place. Taylor also notes that scholars tend to conflate her with Tom Bombadil, despite there being no concrete indication that they are the same type of being. Even if they were, it is important to consider her separately from Tom, as she possesses her own unique qualities and abilities. Tolkien attests to this, stating that she is “the River-woman’s daughter” and represents the changes of the seasons “in the real river-lands of autumn” (Taylor, 147). Perhaps the most obvious characteristic that sets Goldberry apart from her She-Elf counterparts is her cheer and playfulness. Elves like Galadriel tend to be sobered by their power or “distant” from small, everyday matters due to the scope and grandiosity of their lives. Goldberry, though, seems to take pleasure in the everyday—something she shares in common with small folk of Hobbiton.

Some scholars suggest that Goldberry is inspired by the mythical nymph, as they are often depicted as being wily, playful, and closely connected with natural elements. In one instance, Goldberry tugs Tom into the river by his beard, teasing him affectionately. However, this is a separate tale in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, in which she seems to take on more of a sea-siren quality. She is playful and light-hearted, yet obviously has the potential to be dangerous, luring Tom into the depths of the water with ease. In *The Lord of the Rings*, she is often associated with water imagery, appearing to be “enthroned in the midst of a pool”, her footsteps having the quality of a falling stream (Taylor, 148). While this association between

Goldberry and the water nymphs of Classical mythology is often made, Taylor proposes that she actually shares more similarities with the Celtic goddess Etain.

Being one of the Tuatha Dé Danann and a goddess, Etain also possesses semi-divine qualities. However, it is the imagery associated with her that is strikingly similar to that of Goldberry. Both are associated with green, silver, and gold, and are adorned in scale-like garments that recall the imagery of mermaids. When Etain's husband first came upon her, she was combing her hair by a spring. Goldberry is also described as combing her yellow tresses in Tom's home. This may seem like a common domestic activity, but the combing of hair is often associated with water sprites in folklore. Aside from their physical descriptions and associations with the element of water, they also share common themes in their respective love stories (Taylor, 150).

The professions of love and heartfelt offerings that their respective husbands make are strikingly similar. Etain's husband Midir seduces her with affectionate words and offers of fine things: "O lady if thou wilt come to my strong people, the purest of gold shall be on thy head-thy meat shall be the swine's flesh unsalted, new milk and mead shalt thou drink with me there, O fair haired woman" (Taylor, 150). Tom Bombadil's profession of love to Goldberry echoes that of Midir to Etain: "Here's my pretty maiden! / You shall come home with me! The table is all laden: / yellow cream, honeycomb, white bread and butter; / roses at the window-sill and peeping round the shutter" (Taylor, 150). Both Midir and Tom seduce their wives with prospects of comfort and domesticity. I think, however, that Taylor neglects that the former's proposal is much more lofty and denotes a sense of prestige. Tom, on the other hand, is much more familiar in his address of Goldberry, declaring her as his "pretty maiden". His proposal also denotes a

promise of quaint domesticity and quiet comfort, although I will concede that both speak of the comforts of hearth, home, and good food.

On the subject of hearth and home, Tom's home is very similar to the fairy mound palace of Midir, which lies in the Land of Youth (a realm within Ireland.) Of this land, Midir states, "none speaks of 'mine' and 'thine'" (Taylor, 150). The inhabitants are said to possess very fair, ethereal qualities that echo Goldberry's appearance; it is "a marvelous land, full of music, where the hair is primrose yellow and the body as white as snow" (Taylor, 150). Tom and Goldberry are both of a musical quality, and their residence "Under Hill" is said to be filled with their singing and the music of nature. Frodo remarks on the wondrous quality of this place, "Then all this strange land belongs to him?", to which Goldberry replies, "No indeed! All things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves" (Taylor, 150). Both realms are of an ethereal quality; not quite lofty or "paradise-like", but not as quaint and ordinary as the hobbit holes of the Little Folk. Rather, they possess qualities of both and seem to exist somewhere in between. Frodo remarks of "Under Hill": "less keen and lofty was the delight, but deeper and nearer to mortal heart; marvelous and not yet strange" (Taylor, 151). Additionally, both Midir and Tom seem to forgo the concept of dominion over the land, and rather exist harmoniously with their respective realms. Taylor also notes the "separateness" of these realms from the surrounding world. I would note also that the description of "Under Hill" in particular seems to emphasize Tom and Goldberry's respect for the unbridled freedom of the natural world.

Tolkien confirms this respect for the natural world in his description of Tom as being "an exemplar, a particular embodying of a real (pure) natural science" (Taylor, 151). In other words, Tom respects and seeks to understand the workings of nature for his love of it, and does not seek to tame it or use this knowledge to achieve his own ends. He respects the nature of things as they

are and does not seek to meddle with it. Similarly, Tolkien describes the Faerie as being Magic, possessing power not the like of “the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific magician” (Taylor, 151). Taylor does well here to connect these statements, as Tom clearly embodies the opposite of an enterprising, hard-laboring, and scientific magician (one recalls the corruption of Saruman in this description). The magic of Tom and Goldberry is of a natural, musical quality; it is an intrinsic good. As Tolkien states, “The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations” (Taylor, 151). In this way, Tolkien may indirectly equate Tom with Faeries and Celtic creatures.

He does assert, however, that Tom and Goldberry reside in the “real river-lands of autumn” and not in “fairy-land”. Still, Taylor asserts that Goldberry is still of the Faerie- they exist in the real Middle-Earth but their realm is simply of a Faerie-like quality. Placing Taylor’s discussion in conversation with Fimi’s illustration of English culture, we might conclude that the “separateness” and strange quality of “Under Hill” represents the separateness of Irish culture from that of the English. From this perspective, the inclusion of a separate and strange Celtic realm is very much in harmony with Tolkien’s goals for presenting a mythology to the English people.

Each of these scholars makes a strong argument considering the difficulty in grappling with Tolkien’s comments in *The Letters*. All sources include these claims as a kind of catalyst for the discussion, as Tolkien’s opinions do not seem to match up entirely with his creative work. Most scholars, like Fimi and Kinniburgh, focus heavily on *The Silmarillion*, and it is easy to see why, since it is of such grand scale and deals with lofty matters and great deeds. However, *The Lord of the Rings* is not altogether devoid of Celtic myth—although the Celtic presence of “Under Hill” seems to exist purposefully in opposition to the rest of Middle-Earth. Fimi, in

particular, is perhaps the most well-balanced in placing her argument within its cultural-historical context- and this ultimately lends a great deal of insight into Tolkien's mythological goals and, perhaps, instrumental inclusions of Celtic things. Scholars also seem to draw from similar Celtic sources in making their comparisons, and Kinniburgh, Fimi, and Taylor all make comparisons with the Tuatha Dé Danann. Although the scholarship on this subject is sparse compared to the wealth of material on Tolkien's Norse influences, it is unique in the sense that it is relevant to the cultural history of Ireland and England, and the shared (yet separate) history shared between them.

## Bibliography

- Bardowell, Matthew R. "J. R. R. Tolkien's Creative Ethic and Its Finnish Analogues." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 20, no. 1 (75), 2009, pp. 91–108. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24352316>.
- Beach, Sarah. "'A Myth for Angel-Land': J.R.R. Tolkien and Creative Mythology." *Mythlore*, vol. 15, no. 4 (58), 1989, pp. 31–36. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26811943>.
- Fimi, Dimitra. "'Mad' Elves and 'Elusive Beauty': Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien's Mythology." *Folklore*, vol. 117, no. 2, 2006, pp. 156–70. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30035484>.
- Kinniburgh, Annie. "The Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danaan: J.R.R. Tolkien's Irish Influences." *Mythlore*, vol. 28, no. 1/2 (107/108), 2009, pp. 27–44. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26815461>.
- Livingston, Michael. "Troy and the Rings: Tolkien and the Medieval Myth of England." *Mythlore*, vol. 32, no. 1 (123), 2013, pp. 73–91. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26815847>.
- Stenström, Anders. "A Mythology? For England?" *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, no. 33, 1995, pp. 310–14. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45320448>.
- Taylor, Taryne Jade. "Investigating the Role and Origin of Goldberry in Tolkien's Mythology." *Mythlore*, vol. 27, no. 1/2 (103/104), 2008, pp. 147–56. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26814567>.
- Wilson, William A. "The 'Kalevala' and Finnish Politics." *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, vol. 12, no. 2/3, 1975, pp. 131–55. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3813922>.